

Assassination panel avoids showdown

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House assassination committee avoided a showdown Wednesday over the power of its chairman to fire Richard A. Sprague as chief counsel and adjourned without resolving the issue.

The panel acted after a member warned his colleagues: "We don't want a Wednesday afternoon massacre."

Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez, D-Tex., cast the lone dissenting vote when the committee voted 8-1 to postpone until next Monday any action on the chairman's efforts to fire Sprague.

"I think we need an opportunity to work together for a few days to deal with this as an internal matter," Rep. Richardson Preyer, D-N.C., said in calling for the adjournment. "We don't want a Wednesday afternoon massacre."

The differences between Gonzalez and Sprague became public last week when Gonzalez fired Sprague for allegedly defying the chairman's

orders to cut the committee staff as a cost-saving measure.

The panel's other 11 members subsequently endorsed a letter reinstating Sprague the same day, contending that only the committee, rather than Gonzalez acting alone, had the power to dismiss the attorney.

Preyer's move broke up the hearing after the committee had plowed through a long list of proposed rules to govern its intended investigations of the slayings of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The committee had been ready to take up the budget when Preyer argued that because the budget and Sprague's status were closely related, there was no way the committee could resolve either one without some private consultation.

"To go into the budget and charges against Sprague will simply heighten the image of disarray this committee has in the public mind," Preyer said.

Gonzalez, who had warned that the

committee faces serious time and money pressures, urged the panel to act immediately on the Sprague issue.

Gonzalez last week had called Sprague, a former Pennsylvania prosecutor, a "prima donna" and ordered him to vacate his office the same day.

However, when the other panel members countermanded that order, Sprague stayed in his office and remained on the committee payroll.

Sprague sat quietly through the long discussion on proposed rules and at the lunch break responded with a "no comment" to reporters questions.

Sitting at Gonzalez' hand in the hearing was Kenneth Brooten, a staff lawyer who was appointed "acting staff director" by the chairman two days ago, to replace Sprague.

Among rules approved by the committee Wednesday were some controlling the use of electronic devices such as tape recorders, hidden microphones and "stress evaluators" in quizzing witnesses.